

Working Effectively with Your Elected Officials

How to Work an Issue

Focus on one issue: Anyone who reads a newspaper knows that there are a lot of problems in the world. Some are huge, like world hunger, poverty, environmental degradation, etc. Some are small, but affect your everyday life, such as the low quality of your local school, an unsafe street corner in your neighborhood, or library closures. All of these items are very important. However, in order to be effective on any of them, you must focus on one of them at a time. Effecting change takes a tremendous amount of work and diluting your efforts over several different issues at the same time is confusing to those whose help you need. It also drains your energy quickly.

Show up: Woody Allen once said: “Eighty percent of success is showing up”. This could not be truer when trying to effect change on an issue. Showing up to public hearings, community meetings, workshops, or social gatherings will do wonders in making headway toward your cause. Not only do you get to meet people who share your interests, (and possibly form coalitions), you get seen by those who might be able to help you, such as an elected official. These types of events are also great opportunities to spread the word about what you are trying to accomplish. If no one shows up for a public hearing, it can only be assumed that no one cares enough to attend.

Be persistent: Keep in mind that the status quo is easy and most people, no matter what they say, would rather keep things the way they are. They prefer, or even benefit from, stability rather than change. Therefore, to effect change on anything, you must be willing to be in it for the long haul. Keep in mind that those you are fighting against often have more resources than you and will simply out-wait you to get their way. For example, corporations hire paid lobbyists who have all the time in the world to hammer on an issue. If you are up against one of them, you have to stick to your guns in order to get anywhere.

Form coalitions: When you partner with others in trying to effect change, you gain credibility in the eyes of those you are trying to convince. You could have the best argument in the world, but if you are the only one who is making it, it will be harder for you to be listened to. It is wise to take the time to form coalitions with groups or individuals who share your cause. This will boost the number of people who can help you and also show politicians and/or voters that there is momentum behind your issue.

Organize: This may seem like a no-brainer, but any time you can create mailing lists of those who believe in, or might believe in your cause, it helps. That way, when there is a crucial vote on an issue, you are able to get the word out quickly to many people. Also, mailing lists, used wisely, will help keep people up to date on your issue.

Do your homework: Find out all you can about the issue in which you are trying to work. That means pros AND cons of your issue. Do not assume that the other side is just crazy or mean or aloof or stupid. If it were that easy, then the issue would have been dealt with a long time ago. Also, change can only happen through people. That means it is important to know not just the facts and figures about your cause, but who the “players” are as well. They are the ones you need to keep your eye on.

Get political: Often times, the only way to have your cause move forward is to get actively involved in the political system. Work to get people who agree with your cause to get elected. You may even want to encourage someone who isn’t running to run for office. Or run yourself. Sometimes when you can’t change the decision-maker’s mind, you have to change the decision-maker. Getting political also means voting. Voters have a much better chance of getting their way. Non-voters largely do not get their needs met.

Be respectful: Always be polite when dealing with an elected official. You will never get action by an elected official if you hurl insults at them. This doesn’t mean be a nice doormat, just make sure you acknowledge their humanity and the tough decisions they have to make when dealing with them. You’ll get a lot further. Contrary to popular opinion, most politicians ran for office because they wanted to make the world a better place, (at least in their eyes.) Despite the fact that the media often depicts them as lazy, stupid, manipulative, and mean, most politicians are hardworking and actually do care about what the public thinks.

Research your elected official’s interests: Get to know the elected officials you are trying to lobby. You will save yourself time by knocking on the right doors. For example, if you are interested in increasing the availability of affordable housing in your city, it would be helpful to know which Councilmember or other elected official has experience in that area and will be sympathetic to your cause.

Be willing to compromise: There may be times that you will have to compromise in order to get what you want overall. This doesn’t mean water down your goal to the point where it is unrecognizable, but it may mean that you will have to negotiate to get something at least close to your original goal. Otherwise, you run the risk of making no headway at all.

Lighten up: It is always helpful to keep a sense of humor when trying to effect change. Activists often times can get so caught up in the gloom and doom of the world’s problems that their causes become excessively angry. It is often necessary to become angry in order to become motivated, but be sure to keep that anger in check when dealing directly with those whom you would like to convince of the worthiness of your cause. Often times, people will simply see, or get distracted by, the anger and not the good information you are trying to provide. They generally want to deal with positive activists who have hope and drive, not negative cynics who are already convinced that their cause is a lost one.

Stephanie Pure is Legislative Assistant to Councilmember Peter Steinbrueck